Amazon Worker TELLS ALL

Sharon Black

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Written by **Sharon Black**, a former Amazon worker. The series began while the author was working but the conclusion was written after she was forced to resign as a result of several write-ups for failure to make production quotas in the "picker department."

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PART 1

Robotics on steroids

AN AMAZON.COM BALTIMORE WAREHOUSE WORKER

First, a little bit about my background. I worked at a garment sweatshop when I was a teenager, piecing together pockets on raincoats, and later on a General Motors assembly line installing power window regulators until the energy crisis layoffs in the 1980s.

I worked at a food producing plant for 15 years — first as a packer on the assembly line, then as a machine operator, and at one point as a forklift driver. All of the jobs there were unionized.

I've recited this history to illustrate my familiarity with physical labor, speed-ups and assembly lines to contextualize my experience with contemporary conditions.

Why work at Amazon? For two reasons: first, I was retired and trying to live on just Social Security, so I really needed the money; second, to better assess the potential for organizing. Frankly, I also missed feeling of camaraderie that comes from being on the job with other workers.

It's one thing to read about Amazon life or talk to friends who are working at Amazon; it's another to walk, talk and breathe it.

First observations

I was hired at a Fulfillment Center (Amazon's fancy name for a warehouse) that formerly was a GM auto plant where more than 1,100 workers had relatively good-paying jobs until it closed in May 2005.

This Amazon warehouse now employs over 3,000 workers. Approximately 1,500 additional workers were hired in October 2018 at another Amazon warehouse in the area, formerly the site of the historic Bethlehem Steel plant, as big as 13 football fields and once the largest steel mill in the country.

Approximately 5,000 Maryland workers labor at these huge sites along with two other Amazon warehouses: one where mostly part-time workers finish the last step of sending out products, and a smaller facility near BWI airport.

Mass hiring: The cattle call process

Younger workers would probably laugh at me for noticing this: the hiring process is faceless and driven by the Internet. There is no human resources department in the commonly understood sense. You apply online and take a kind of aptitude test, with no past work experience asked for or needed.

Qualifications? You must be able to walk six to 10 miles a day and lift 50 pounds — they mean that, too. The only time you face off with a human being is when you take your saliva drug test with 40 to 50 other people. If you pass the test, your start date arrives via email.

Waiting for the test and orientation gave me a chance to talk to other workers and make friends.

The majority were young. I believe only 3 of us, out of the 40 people in my group, looked over 50 years old. I was the oldest. About 80 percent were Black youth. The rest of those applying were white and a mixture of other nationalities: Latinx, Arab, Asian, etc. At least half were women. In other words, we looked

An Amazon Picker

like Baltimore. This cattle scene was repeated every hour as new hires went through the process.

One young woman, who told me she was 25 years old, was trying to get hired because of the pay. Her experience sums up why so many people are eager to get a job at Amazon.

She was still working at a Walmart warehouse for $11 an hour. Amazon was paying around $13. She didn't really want to leave her old job, but she was taking care of her mother and desperately needed financial stability.

Robotics

Amazon's internal culture and the robotics end of it feel like a science fiction movie. I certainly remember as a very young auto worker being struck by the size and scope of the facility and at the same time the power of the workers who were unionized. In this case, I was struck by the power of the robots!

We were ordered to never, ever set foot, or for that matter swing an arm, into the taped-off area where the robots reside. We were

told that the robots on the special robot floor do not have eyes and can accidentally kill us. Violating this rule meant immediate termination. Only those with special skills can go into that area. They wear vests and carry around special laptops.

I felt like I was living in the TV series "The Colony," about to be transported aboard a giant spaceship to be taken to the factory, or in Boots Riley's film "Sorry to Bother You." OK, I'm sure Jeff Bezos, billionaire CEO of Amazon, would take issue. But then he's never worked in his facilities.

My job is as a "picker." The robots and the coordinated computer system certainly run my life, my body, and ultimately my 10-hour shift.

No one wants to be a picker. I met several new hires who only came back if they could find work in other departments. They claimed that more workers assigned to be pickers were fired than from any other job. Usually 50 percent of the new hires don't make it. (I'll have more to say on this in Part 2.)

Our common refrain is that Amazon is like a big prison, only we are able to go home and sleep at night. At this time of the year, we go to work in the dark and get off in the dark. For full-time workers in the Maryland warehouses, there is no such thing as the 8-hour day — only 10-hour and 12-hour shifts.

PART 2

21st century exploitation

AN AMAZON.COM BALTIMORE WAREHOUSE WORKER

It was still dark driving to work on Saturday, Nov. 3. That's when I heard on the news that part of an Amazon warehouse had collapsed. Two workers had been trapped and killed. It was unclear which warehouse was impacted. Was I reporting there?

No word from Amazon, which constantly emails and texts us. I didn't know what to think. When I arrived, I saw trees down, and roads to the adjacent smaller warehouse on Holabird Avenue were blocked off. Police and firefighters were stationed around the area, but the building I worked in seemed intact.

Everything felt surreal. The atmosphere was business as usual. I expected at Stand Up — our early morning "Amazon pep rally" — that there would be a moment of silence to recognize the workers who died in the building collapse. Somehow, my heart felt even sadder for their deaths, maybe because Amazon didn't seem to recognize their value, not even a minute of morning silence.

My co-workers agreed with me. There should have been something, some way of recognizing the workers who died. Only after the 10-hour shift had passed were the flags around the building lowered to half mast.

Stand up for capitalism; stand up for Bezos

So what is Stand Up? Every Amazon worker knows what I'm talking about. I hated it. It is about 10 minutes of phony pep

talks that are really designed to squeeze every drop of human effort out of every worker.

At the start of the shift, workers gather by department to get their workstation assignments. Stand Up starts with perfunctory stretch exercises, supposed to cut down on injuries. Following this, the manager — with a mic in hand — exhorts us each to be the "power picker" of the day. Sometimes, Michael Jackson music is played to energize Amazon's morning pep rally. I doubt that Jackson authorized the free use of his music being to make billionaire Bezos richer. And at every Stand Up you either have to "clap it out" or do a raised fist huddle at the end.

I always hung back, disgusted at this display of New Age capitalist hypocrisy. I wasn't the only worker who pretended to be half asleep. Very few of us displayed any enthusiasm, even lured with the offers of discount merchandise or free lunches as rewards for a "productivity record."

Brutal productivity rates

The stories that are told by Amazon workers about the levels of expected productivity are not exaggerated in the least. In fact, probably understated. Pickers, which is the job I do, are assigned to a individual workstation. We are relatively isolated with just a computer, conveyor belt, plastic bins and 6-foot-tall robot towers that continually move on the floor.

From the moment we start until we turn the station off, our motions are clocked and watched — yes, there are cameras everywhere. How quickly you pick each item to put it in the bins is measured. Slow? You can be written up. And I was written up for this.

If you make a mistake, especially if it's misjudging something and marking the item missing, it is a write-up. Three write-ups and you're on the way out the door, if not fired outright.

A young worker who had been a picker at the warehouse for about two and a half years clued me in on the production rate.

He told me when he first started the highest number for picking rate was 250 per hour; the expectation now is as high as 450.

What's it like? The computer screen tells you to pick a specific item from a specific shelf in a tall robot bin — so tall, that if the item is on the top shelf it can mean climbing a ladder. Get it, scan it, and put it in one of four or five bins indicated by a flashing light. All to be done in as little as 6 seconds.

You cannot sit. There is nowhere to do so with the exception of the portable ladders and this is forbidden. Even if the conveyor belt jams up and everything stops, you can't rest.

On top of that, everyone gets exhorted frequently to pick faster. Win the prize. Be the "power hour picker."

Several times I was singled out by my supervisor, who told me I was too slow and at the bottom rung of pickers. Amazon shames slower workers to push production — they actually announce names.

Breaks that are barely breaks

We get two breaks during our 10-hour shift; both are supposed to be 30 minutes. One is paid and the other you have to punch out. But the truth is that you could spend up to 5 to 10 minutes walking to your break area, and maybe longer, plus

the same returning to your workstation. You are expected to start up in exactly 30 minutes.

What is equally aggravating is the lunch break punch-in and punch-out system. You cannot punch-in early, so you have to stand and wait until the very minute strikes. But if you accidentally punch back in at your workstation-out 3 minutes late, you will be docked for an additional hour.

The pressure to meet production standards is so intense, even bathroom breaks are difficult to take. The bathroom may be quite a distance either on the other side of your floor or on a different floor altogether, difficult to reach within the time restrictions. On one shift, I was so worried about being written up that I didn't go to the bathroom and had an accident.

Like leaving jail at the end of the shift

Okay, I'm older. I stumble at the end of the shift. I try not to. I try to walk straight and act like it doesn't hurt, but it's an act. One day at lunch, I asked a worker who'd been there three years if it gets any easier. She said, "Nope. You get adjusted, but it never stops hurting."

Other workers told us that conditions in the summer were brutally hot. "They finally installed fans at the workstations." But people "still do fall out." It's so noticeable that there are signs posted in the bathroom stalls indicating the color of urine and other signs of dangerous dehydration.

Although weapons and phones are not allowed in the building — there is no scan when you enter. But to exit is like leaving jail. Place your keys and change in bins, walk through metal detectors, pick up your phone if you left it in a locker, scan your badge, go through the turnstiles and hit the doors to leave.

It's dark out, but I'm happy to finally get to my car and sit down.

PART 3

Let's organize!

AN AMAZON.COM BALTIMORE WAREHOUSE WORKER

There are few things that illustrate the ethical bankruptcy of capitalism as much as Jeff Bezos' obscene amassed wealth. Bezos is the richest person in the world, raking in $236 million a minute, with a net worth of $153-plus billion. His world empire is built on the backs of a brutally exploited workforce, wrested from the communities in which Amazon operates.

To put this into context: it would take $20 billion to end homelessness; $30 billion to end world hunger. If Jeff Bezos had $50 billion less, he would still have another $100 billion. The question is, how many pairs of shoes can one wear, how many yachts can one sail on, how many houses can one person live in? The absurdity is obvious.

If you think that Bezos' wealth trickles down in the form of taxes that provide services, note that this year Amazon paid $0 on $11.2 billion in profits and received a $129 million dollar return.

How do we fight back?

No one can deny that it has been a difficult period for working-class struggle. Workers are forced to compete with each other globally, which has lowered wages and disempowered workers. If autoworkers complain in Detroit, auto bosses threaten to move to Mexico or to some other place where labor

costs are lower. To make matters worse, giants like Walmart, FedEx and Amazon seem to have endless resources to thwart unionization.

We have also seen decades of defeats for unions to the point that union membership has dwindled to 10.7 percent, with the private sector dropping to 6.4 percent, leaving younger workers with little understanding of what being organized means.

As painful as this is, we shouldn't despair, as these same dynamics have opened up incredible opportunities. We should look at the opportunities.

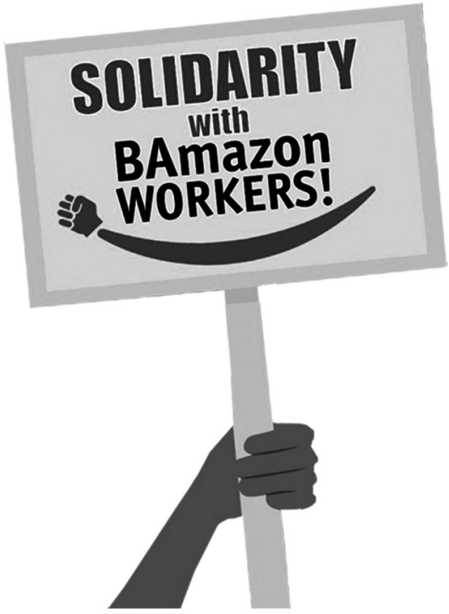
There are now approximately 351,000 Amazon workers worldwide and 280,000 in the U.S. alone. These figures are growing every day and are already out of date.

There are thousands of Amazon warehouse workers laboring under one roof, part of the logistics supply chain, making the power potential enormous. The "just-in-time" and "lean production" methods that now dominate the supply chain can give us the upper hand.

While technology has created a global working class, it has also opened up the means to organize and communicate worker-to-worker on a worldwide basis.

That process is beginning.

Amazon is unionized in many of the European countries, and workers' strikes and struggles crossed borders in this past year. On Nov. 23, 2018, "Black Friday," Amazon warehouse workers went on strike and held protests in Germany, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom under the slogan of "We are not robots." Amazon workers from Poland have organized with German workers.



The following are modest proposals:

National Union Coordinating Council for Amazon Workers

There are many unions, which to their credit are looking at unionizing or representing Amazon workers, including the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, the Teamsters, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the Service Employees International Union, the American Postal Workers Union and the Communication Workers of America. (There may be others that I have left off or some on this list who are not currently actively engaged.)

What's needed is a "National Union Coordinating Council" that includes all interested unions and the AFL-CIO leadership. Sectarian interests have to be set aside so that those who are committed can share resources, build adequate funds, engage in public campaigns and work jointly both nationally and locally.

An organized Amazon could revive the union movement and reverberate in all sectors, and no one union, whatever its size, can do it alone.

It's a big job for those of us who are community members and Amazon workers to convince the unions, but it's an important challenge.

Organize "Workers and Community Unions"

While the traditional trade union movement remains an important tool for workers, we should look for every avenue possible to advance workers' power.

The Somalian workers demanding justice in Shakopee, Minn., outside of Minneapolis, are an exciting example. Through the Atwood Center, which represents East African workers, and with community support, they staged protests and successfully forced concessions from Amazon. The workers and the Center have led several protests and more recently, on March 10, 2019, a three-hour strike of workers in the stow department.

This was preceded by campaigns in Seattle, which set the stage for public pressure, most notably by Bernie Sanders, that led to Bezos' announcement of raising wages to $15 an hour. Recently, widespread community protests in New York City against the building of a second Amazon headquarters forced Bezos to cancel the plans. Protests were aimed at making Amazon accountable to the community.

What are some of the concrete challenges in the Baltimore warehouses? Why would a community approach that is aimed at these workers be helpful, maybe more than any other at this point?

First, Amazon is largely a revolving door when it comes to workers; thousands of its workers are precarious, cycled back and forth between the community and seasonal work. You can ask almost any working-class family in Baltimore, and they

have a relative or know someone who has worked at Amazon or is working there now.

At one warehouse, high school students worked the all-night shift, so that they could attend school during the day. The work is brutal, and it's also common for people to work several months or even less before being forced to quit. Write-ups for failure to make production rates are done to weed out slower workers.

It makes exploitation at Amazon a community affair. The advantage of communitywide organizing is three fold: one, it serves as general education and organization; two, it provides the necessary rock-solid support that can encourage struggle inside (We've got your back!); and three, it harnesses broader working-class power against Amazon.

Finally, it may just be this kind of experimentation that revives a new chapter in working-class organizing in the U.S. Remember the heroic "Rising of 20,000" young women garment workers in 1909. Before this general strike, it was thought that women were incapable of being organized. And don't forget the sit-down strikes, a new tactic that turned the labor movement upside down and paved the way for industrial worker organizing.

My appeal to youth

There is a whole new generation of youth who have turned against capitalism as a viable system precisely because it has offered them nothing. Many of them see themselves as socialists and some as revolutionaries.

Think of getting a job at Amazon!

If you can commit to staying and doing the patient work of organizing even better. But at a minimum, an Amazon warehouse job will give you the kind of education and understanding of exploitation that's better than any textbook can do alone.

It will increase your ability to empathize with and understand other workers. It will teach patience, humility and respect.

There are lots of mistakes that we will all make, of that I'm sure, but there is no simple road to changing the world and no way to do it without the working class.

The series "Eyewitness Amazon" was written by Sharon Black, a former Amazon worker. The series began while the author was working but the conclusion was written after she was forced to resign as a result of several write-ups for failure to make production quotas in the "picker department."

Alabama Amazon workers RESPECT right to a union!

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